



# LAOS

## A New Beginning

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The square in front of the That Luang shrine (in background at right) has been the scene of many public celebrations in recent months. Photo by Hiep Dong/VNA.

"The quiet revolution" quickly became the prime cliche to describe the final stages of Laos' long struggle to free itself from foreign domination. This was not to deny the years of bombing, and the proxy war waged by the CIA with mercenaries from the highlands and from Thailand.

The quietest step of all came on December 3, 1975, when King Sri Savang Vatthana abdicated, the coalition government was dissolved, and the patiently organized people's councils became the interim government of the newly-declared People's Democratic Republic of Laos.

The direction of Laos' future had been spelled out in the peace agreement reached in 1973. The agreement was overwhelmingly advantageous to the Lao Patriotic Front (LPF) side, and represented a clear defeat for the U.S. and the Vientiane side, as the rightists were known. The beginning of a new society in the Vientiane-controlled zone of Laos began in February of 1974. Many obvious changes occurred at that time: the formation of the coalition political council; the apportionment of ministries between the Lao Patriotic Front and Vientiane sides; the presence of LPF soldiers; and then, later, the little noted but very important voluntary return of a majority of refugees to LPF-controlled areas. But the final chapter could not be written until the U.S. had been forced to abandon its Indochina adventure. The military victories of the Cambodian and Vietnamese revolutionaries set the stage for Laos to complete its liberation.

Drums rolled. Cymbals clashed. Townspeople shouted and cheered. Young people sang and danced in the streets. It was 7:30 Saturday morning, August 23, 1975. The dark streets were jammed with tens of thousands of people chanting and slowly marching to the That Luang shrine. Vientiane was liberated. The That Luang was to become the scene of the biggest celebration in Laotian history.

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This issue of the Indochina Chronicle was edited by the Indochina Resource Center staff from reports written by Linda and Murray Hiebert and by Lou and Eryl Kubicka, who are the permanent representatives in Vientiane of, respectively, the Mennonite Central Committee and the American Friends Service Committee.

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Cover photo: Class in Sam Neua Province. Photo by KPL (Khaosan Pathet Lao, the official Lao news agency).

For the first time in generations, Laos was finally at peace. For the first time in nearly 200 years, Laos was once again united. Throughout its history, the "Kingdom of a Million Elephants" was only occasionally united and strong. Until the end of the eighteenth century, Laos was for the most part divided into four lesser kingdoms. In 1778 Thai warlords seized the southern Mekong River provinces of Laos and for the next hundred years it was little more than a buffer state between the rivaling powers of Vietnam and Thailand. In the last half of the nineteenth century, Laos, like the other two countries of Indochina, fell under French colonial domination. But even with the defeat of the French in 1954, peace and reunification were not yet to return to Laos. The United States moved in to replace the French and during the next twenty years Laos suffered from the most violent war of its history. After the failure of two earlier attempts at a ceasefire and coalition government, the Vientiane Agreement was finally signed in February 1973. A few months later the Provisional Government of National Un-

ion (PGNU), a coalition between the nationalistic LPF and the American-backed Vientiane side, was formed. In May 1975 demonstrations against the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), the CIA, and corrupt, rightist government ministers and generals finally ended thirty years of American involvement. Laos was once again at peace, and on the road to reunification.

One of the primary objects of the student demonstrations in May was AID, which had been involved in Laos since 1955. AID had spent \$750 million in Laos, for covert operations as well as for its publicly acknowledged projects. The student demonstrations had the support of the government and of the LPF. On May 24 an agreement was reached between the U.S. and Laos, including the dissolution of AID/Laos, the withdrawal of non-Lao AID personnel, and the turnover of AID property to the Lao government.

Public demonstrations also heralded the changes in areas formerly controlled by the Vientiane side. The May demonstrations had included workers from various ministries, demanding the resignation of corrupt officials. Then, beginning in June, student demonstrations in provincial towns signaled shifting allegiances throughout the urban areas. By Friday, August 22, there had been a decisive shift of power in Vientiane.

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Some radical changes have begun to take place in the formerly American-supported lifestyle of Vientiane. As in Vietnam the mass exodus of the free-spending Americans has aggravated the problem of unemployment, especially in the non-productive sectors of the urban economy. Many recently-unemployed workers and lower-paid urban workers such as pedicab drivers and household helpers are returning to the countryside to plant rice and vegetables. The government is trying to assist those who stay in the city. Recently it began hiring people to clean up Vientiane, to sweep the streets, cut the grass, and pick up the garbage. An attempt is being made to provide government workers with seeds and plots of land on the plain around Vientiane to help them cope with the skyrocketing cost of urban living. The government is also selling condensed milk and Vietnamese rice at subsidized rates to the poor people of Vientiane. Nevertheless, the immense new unemployment problem of the past months has created an upsurge of violent crime unusual in Laotian cities.

Except for young, Western students or hippie types, the basic composition of tourists to Laos has changed. One Vietnamese hotel owner said that in contrast to earlier days, he now has very few American guests. There are still a few French, he said, but most of the new tourists seem to be Russian. They come to Vientiane every two weeks on chartered flights from Moscow. They are given tours of pagodas, shops and historical

monuments in former AID buses. In May many Chinese, Indian and Vietnamese shopkeepers considered leaving because business was dropping. Now they plan to stay. They argue that the Russians are "good customers" and "bargain better than the Americans." With the exodus of the American doctors, technicians and engineers, and many French and Laotians as well, Laos has had to look for technical assistance from socialist Asian and European countries.

Since the demonstrations of May and the subsequent efforts at a more thorough integration of the police and military of the coalition government, an increasing number of LPF cadre have been



LPF cadre in Vientiane. Photo by Linda Hiebert.

gun appearing in Vientiane. In earlier years of the Laotian nationalist struggle, a limited number of LPF representatives were basically restricted to their small headquarters behind the post office. The other two efforts at a coalition government in 1958 and 1962 ended in violence against the cadre and representatives of the LPF. Now, however, they seem perfectly confident. One sees cadre in the market or in small restaurants visiting with shopkeepers and customers. Some of the new soldiers and policemen are obviously new to the baggy green LPF uniform. Possibly they are "reformed" former Vientiane side soldiers. For example, one might see them patrolling a street corner wearing a gold watch, wire-rimmed sunglasses, and with their LPF hat pushed up on

the middle of their heads -- certainly a striking contrast to the more simple-dressing veteran of ten years of American B-52 bombing raids in the mountains and jungles of Laos. Vientiane has also seen numerous truckloads of smiling, waving, young female cadre riding into town in the back of Russian-built trucks.

## Songs Reflect A New Spirit

From the shops along the street, in the bustling market, from children riding by on bicycles, the song, "We Are Lao People," can be heard. "All Lao families come together, walk together, unite the large Lao family." For generations Laos has been divided, dominated, torn by war. Now the people sing with pride, with joy, "Lao people, Lao land . . . come together . . . or the monsters will take our land." Perhaps because it's a catchy tune, everyone seems to be singing this song. More likely it's because the Lao people feel deeply that at last they as a nation, a people, truly are free. It has been a long struggle for peace, independence and reunification. The lyrics of this song reflect the new mood and spirit of reconciliation, a spirit of struggling together to rebuild the country, a spirit of reconstructing a society based on national pride and awareness.

Throughout the struggle there were those who realized that Laos could be free and independent only if the country again became economically self-sufficient. In recent months many people have been moving back into a productive agricultural economy. Thirty years of warfare created 800,000 refugees; nearly one-third of the population was resettled into refugee camps. Others went to the cities to find employment with the Americans. With a large percentage of the potentially productive population either in the military or in refugee camps, the traditionally self-sufficient agricultural economy became almost totally dependent on foreign aid. But since the advent of peace, more than 100,000 refugees have returned to their villages in the countryside. With the exit of AID and the virtual cutoff of American aid last summer, jobs in the cities became either unavailable or less economically profitable. As a result many unemployed or lower-paid urban workers have followed the refugees back to the farm. Many civil servants have sent their families to the countryside to plant rice and vegetables. Others have begun to plant gardens in the cities. With the end of hostilities, the massive military and police force -- totaling over 100,000 people for the two sides -- is being

integrated and reduced to 40,000. Many of these demobilized soldiers are also returning to the farm.

"Children of the Farmer," another catchy, popular song, reminisces about the "good life, . . . the cool and comfortable life" of the farmer. This is the way of life the Lao remember, the life they long to recapture. Unfortunately for those now returning to the countryside, life will not be this "easygoing"--at least not yet. After fifteen years of savage American bombing, their houses are destroyed, their water buffalo killed, and their paddy fields bomb-cratered, overgrown, and still littered with unexploded bombs and mines. Nevertheless, the Lao people are optimistic. As "children of the farmer," they are confident that they will reclaim the land once more.

Perhaps because the landscape of Laos is characterized by rugged terrain and a poor system of communications, the central Laotian government has traditionally not been very influential. Decisions were made by consensus at the village,



New songs recall pleasant memories of life in the countryside and encourage people to return. Photo by Monique McClellan.

county and district levels. However, as the American involvement and the fighting increased in the 1960s, the Vientiane government began exerting greater influence and authority in the areas under its control. District and province representatives were no longer elected by the local people, but appointed from the outside. Often they came from another part of the country and understood little of the problems and needs of the area. Village democracy broke down and the opinions of the villagers became unimportant. As one villager described it, "The village council meetings began centering around the format of the next village 'buon' [festival at the pagoda]."

Today, as "Children of the Farmer" explains, people are once again encouraged to work, to cooperate, and to participate in the decision-making process which affects their lives. Once again the people have a voice in the affairs of the various government bodies, in the election of

village, district and provincial representatives. People's revolutionary councils have been elected and established by the people at the various government levels.

People with previously unused skills and dedication are now being sought out and utilized. Phuon, a self-supporting primary school teacher, taught in an overcrowded, rickety bamboo shack north of Vang Vieng. The school was situated on a hill and when the wind blew it had to be evacuated for fear the building would collapse. Nevertheless Phuon worked diligently. Every year a higher percentage of his graduates went on to secondary school than from any other school in the district. Each year he appealed to the government for supplies to build a new school, but to no avail. With the social revolution of the past few months, however, Phuon's diligence and skills were finally recognized. The young teacher/farmer has been elected head of the district's education committee. In the weeks since, Phuon has already obtained enough cement and steel for the foundation, floor and wall uprights not only to replace the small primary school, but to build a larger, regional elementary school in its stead.

With the departure of the Americans in June, the government in Vientiane no longer has funds to support the formerly large civil, military and police systems. As a result the people and their



Government workers put "hats" over young seedlings. They have joined a gardening campaign to reduce the city's dependency on imported food. Photo by Murray Hiebert.

revolutionary committees are beginning to take responsibility for establishing local civilian defense units, for securing their neighborhoods against thieves, and for cleaning the streets and picking up garbage. Revolutionary committees are also being established to represent the various groupings of society such as youth, women, stu-

dents, policemen, workers, farmers, householders. Children who formerly roamed the streets stealing and begging are now involved in children's groups. There they spend much of their day singing, playing games with, and listening to the stories of Lao Patriotic Front cadre. Many urban high school students who used to speed up and down the streets on their motorcycles are now involved in youth meetings. Women meet to discuss and seek solutions to the inequality of women and men in Vientiane compared with the greater equal-

## WORKING TOGETHER



Photo by Lou Kubicka.

The sight of hundreds of Vientiane's inhabitants cleaning up the public streets, unimaginable a year ago, is today a sight real enough to warm socialist hearts....

Following three active weeks of work, Vientiane has taken on a brighter look. Miles of gutters and footpaths have received their first attention in years. The rubbish-strewn strip of public land along the Mekong River is rapidly being turned into parkland. In Bung Kha Nyong community, members decided to repair the home of their most impoverished member first, then slowly work up from the bottom of the social ladder. In the past, improvement always worked from the top of the social ladder downwards, though never reaching those now receiving attention....

The communal clubs and working "bees" have drawn out families with little previous neighbourhood contact. Some people have felt compelled to join in as their neighbours cleared out drains and footpaths adjoining their own homes. What ensued was a combination of work and good humour.

"The spirit of working together is so good, it's hard to describe," said one Western-educated youth. "And it's so very Lao. Some of us had forgotten what it's like to be Lao."

--John Everingham, Far Eastern Economic Review, October 17, 1976



Buddhist monks attend the August 23 celebration of the liberation of Vientiane. Photo by Lou Kubicka. Young Buddhists bring offerings to the pagoda. Photo by Linda Hiebert.

ity of the sexes in the older liberated areas of Laos. Workers', farmers', and policemen's groups meet in the evenings to discuss and resolve the particular problems related to their employment group.

An American vegetable gardener in Vientiane recently went to his neighbor's house to complain about some neighborhood children pilfering food from his kitchen. He never made his complaint, however; the house was hosting a meeting of the local youth group. The American was invited to participate. He was amazed at the level of sophistication of these neighborhood young people who only a few weeks before seemed so unconcerned and uninvolved. The youth briefly discussed and analyzed the American involvement in Laos, the destruction caused by the war in the countryside, and the collapse of the Laotian economy. But the young people were not bogged down with newly-learned rhetoric or on the problems of the past; they pushed on to try to solve the immediate economic and food crisis of their neighborhood. They decided to fill in a large swampy area in front of the local pagoda and plant vegetables for the neighborhood. The young people decided that produce would be given to everyone in the neighborhood -- even those families which did not have children to help in the project. The American gardener was invited to work with them.

"Politics for everyone" is the new theme for Laos. A Lao teacher at the Lao-American Association -- who, like many others of the urban middle class is quite critical of the revolution because of what it will mean for her superficially affluent lifestyle--recently commented: "At least now we're being told what our government is doing. We're allowed to participate in the events concerning our lives. That was never the case before." With the absence of massive influxes of American aid, it is clear that people will have to find unique solutions to fit the new Laotian realities and capabilities. The result has been

the development of a new national and cultural pride. "Let's come together and rebuild our country." The Laotians are developing not only a sense of being involved, but a new sense of responsibility as well. A young Laotian student excitedly reported that he had just been elected head of his neighborhood youth group. At first he was apprehensive about the new position -- he had never done anything like this before. A few days later, however, he was beaming with a new pride, a new sense of involvement. There is something he and his neighborhood friends can do about their problems.

Laos is returning to the Laotian people. "The Laotian people are like a patch of grass crushed by a heavy rock for 200 years," a Buddhist leader explained. "When the rock is removed, the grass will rejoice."

## Religion And The Revolution

On May 12, at the height of the demonstrations against AID and corrupt, rightist generals and government officials, an American airplane landed in Long Cheng, the stronghold of General Vang Pao's CIA-backed Meo mercenary army in central Laos. The plane was loaded with leaflets supposedly the minutes of a recent LPF meeting in Sam Neua province. The "minutes" outlined the supposed military, political, economic and social strategy of the Lao Patriotic Front in defeating the American-supported Vientiane government. The leaflet stated that the monarchy would be abolished, private property would be collectivized, and religion would be exterminated. According to the leaflet, "Religion belongs . . . to thebour-

*geoisie and the noble class. In the controlled areas, all citizens must refrain from believing and respecting the customs, superstitions, beliefs, or spirits. In order to destroy these useless beliefs, punishments will be put to use. Regarding religion we will only pretend to have twenty percent for the sake of our reputation and deep-rooted old men.... Those LPF functionaries who believe in superstitious things will be punished and accused of being bourgeoisie and nobles."*

The leaflet was clearly a forgery. The "minutes" contradict the policy and practice of the LPF on several basic points. Even in areas such as Sam Neua and Phong Saly, which have been under the control of the Front since 1954, peasant properties have not been collectivized. Both Buddhists and Christians continue to worship and practice their religion in the older liberated zones of Laos. Ly Teck, then Director of Administration of the PGNU's Ministry of the Interior and like Vang Pao a descendant of the Meo king, commented, "This leaflet may not have been written by the Americans but surely by someone in psychological warfare.... The Americans provided the paper—I can certify the paper came from the Americans—no such paper exists in Laos or Thailand."

Nevertheless, the leaflet had a devastating effect on the Meo tribespeople. Fearing that they would lose the right to work their own land and to continue their ancient religious practices, 30,000 Meo people fled to northern Thailand. Ly Teck continued, "When I reached Long Cheng [on May 13], everyone told me they were afraid because of the leaflet." Thousands of other Meos attempted to flee but were turned back.

Laos has traditionally been a deeply religious country. Unlike most countries, Laos has had a government Ministry of Religions and Cults, and the Minister of Religion held a position on the coalition cabinet. Many LPF officials are themselves ardently religious. Just before Phoumi Vongvichit, ranking LPF Central Committee member and ex-Minister of Foreign Affairs, left for medical treatment in China in July, he lamented to a friend that young people in Laos no longer seem interested in religion. Phoumi observed that Buddhism in Laos was primarily becoming a religion for old people.

Theravada Buddhism was introduced as the state religion of Laos at the founding of the "Kingdom of a Million Elephants" in the fourteenth century. Over the centuries the pagoda has become the religious, cultural and educational center of each village and neighborhood. Many of the most popular works in Lao literature are long poems with themes drawn from Buddhist scriptures. Today, with over 20,000 monks and 1,000 pagodas in a country of only three million people, Buddhism continues to have a pervasive influence on the Laotian people and society. Often the only one

who can read, the monk is the teacher, historian, intellectual and leader of the small village in the countryside. The basic role of the Laotian

## USAID & CIA



*Photo by Murray Hiebert.*

Until a band of pro-Communist students recently forced the U.S. Agency for International Development to pack up and leave Laos, AID ran what amounted to a parallel government in this tiny Indochinese kingdom.

The real mission of this quasi-governmental structure was not to improve the life of the ordinary Laotians, but to help support the country's anti-Communist forces in their battle against the Pathet Lao....

"We did create a lot of development," a senior AID staff member said the other day, "but it was just a side effect. There was never any doubt that we were spending millions here to support the royal Lao government in its fight against the Communists...."

"We were into everything," said one AID officer. "We went through the whole mill in this country. Everywhere you looked, there was some American driving a truck, inspecting a new highway, feeding refugees, running the whole show."

As to being the enemy, there isn't much doubt about that, either. With its widespread network of Lao-speaking Americans, AID was a handy front for the CIA which was actively engaged in the fight against the Pathet Lao and its ally, the North Vietnamese army.

In the small provincial towns where AID had offices, CIA, military and other American personnel lived and worked with AID workers. AID officers deny that any of their personnel were CIA agents, but they do not deny that the CIA used the organization for cover.

*--Lewis M. Simons, Washington Post, June 16, 1975*

monk, however, is to study the Buddhist scriptures and teach people how to live in conformity with the teachings of Buddha.

The foreign domination of Laos during the past two centuries and the war of the past three decades have undermined Laotian Buddhism. Buddhism was divided as some monks supported the American involvement, others the struggle for national independence. As the war destroyed the Laotian agricultural economy and created hundreds of thousands of refugees, many families began sending their sons to the pagoda because there a child could receive food and an education. As a result, the quality of monks deteriorated. Dr. Khampeng Ounpengvong, General Secretary of the Buddhist Studies Institute in Vientiane, explained further that monks were restricted in their movement by the Vientiane government as the American influence and involvement increased in the 1960s. The monks were no longer allowed to move

about freely in the countryside teaching and helping the people.

However, with the signing of the Vientiane Agreement and the formation of the coalition government in 1974, freedom of movement for monks was restored. In November 1974 monks from the older liberated areas attended a Buddhist conference in Vientiane. Now monks in the former Vientiane side are again free to move about in the countryside. During 1974 refugees began to return to their former fields, and as the new society provides education as a right for all rather than for a privileged few, fewer men not truly dedicated to the monkhood will enter the pagoda. Attempts are also being made to involve the monks from the former Vientiane side in direct service to the people, to help in the reconstruction and redevelopment of Laos, as monks in the older liberated areas have been doing throughout the war. In May 1975 Dr. Khampeng led a delegation of four

## ELECTING PEOPLE'S COUNCILS

There [are] three levels of government between the people and the national government, each one now to be headed by a "people's assembly" in place of the one-man office.

Each of the people's assemblies is intended to act as a mini-parliament to debate and act on the issues within its geographical limits, in much the same manner as a national assembly in any democracy. Voters elect the representatives of their choice, who in turn elect from their own numbers an executive committee for actual implementation of policies. The entire assembly also votes in a president.

Election for the lower two of the three levels has already taken place. For each *tas-seng* (district), a geographic area consisting of approximately five to 10 villages, assemblies of between 15 and 20 members have been elected. Their executive committees have five to seven members, according to the population.

For the *neuangs* (municipalities), assemblies of 20 to 30 members were selected in a vote held in Vientiane on November 15. These then chose executives of seven to nine. The vote for *quang* (province) assemblies will take place soon, with 30 to 40 members being elected, again depending on the population figures. The executive here will be between nine and 13.

These electoral processes are described as temporary. The appointment of three levels of elected government is intended to build a solid base and act as a concrete example for the election of a National Assembly ... next year....

The polls were by secret ballot. Each ballot was printed with the numbers of 20 to 30 candidates for the 15 main assemblies. By cancelling the numbers of those not liked, the voter left intact his preferred assembly of 15. Neither names nor registration numbers of the voters were put on the ballot slips, and secrecy was maintained.

The final assemblymen and women who turned out for appointment ceremonies were representatives of the Lao community. Along with older men, there were numbers of women and young people, some not far above the minimum age of 18. The cross-section of professions that found their way into the assemblies was also unprecedented. Laborers and farmers will sit in assembly discussions with businessmen, professionals, tradespeople, and housewives....

At the level of national government the people will elect, as they did under the old regime, a House of National Assembly. The actual form for elections and choice of candidates is as yet undecided. All voters are now being called to public meetings for lectures on their new democratic rights.

With a better understanding of the electoral proceedings, the population can expect greater control of their government at the national level as well as through the local assemblies.

--John Everingham, Far Eastern Economic Review, November 28, 1975



Mountains cover most of Laos, with farming villages nestled in the valleys. Photo by KPL.

monks -- two from the Vientiane side and two from the older liberated areas -- to study the Saravodaya Movement in Sri Lanka. The Saravodaya ("Way of the People") Movement is an effort by leaders and lay persons of various religions to participate directly in alleviating the social problems of the people through various developmental, agricultural and social work projects. When the five monks returned to Laos they prepared a report on their observations. This report was then used by the Minister of Religion, himself previously a monk in Sam Neua, in making a proposal to the coalition government for the involvement of monks in the reconstruction and development of the countryside. This fall the Buddhist Studies Institute in Vientiane introduced practical courses such as agriculture to prepare monks for greater involvement in social services to the people.

Since the exodus of AID in June, reeducation seminars have begun in every village and neighborhood. Many of these seminars are held in pagodas. Special seminars are also being held for the monks. As Dr. Khampeng explained, "The monks are viewed as important religious and social leaders in the community. The monks go to seminars to be

informed about what's happening. Many people are confused by the new situation and they come to the pagoda to ask questions. The monks must know what's going on so they can inform and guide the people." Some monks from older liberated areas are coming to Vientiane to explain to the people what changes the revolution has brought to their areas. Recently a monk from Sam Neua talked about the relationship of Buddhism to the revolution at a seminar for the Public Works Department. "If you think about it, Buddha was history's first socialist." The monk continued, "He sold all his goods and gave the money to the poor. He tried to serve the people."

Today only about 60,000 Laotians are Christians -- less than one percent of the total population -- almost equally divided between Catholics and Protestants. Even after the complete conquest of Indochina by the French in 1893, Catholic missionaries met with little success in Laos. The same was true for the Protestant missionaries who arrived in 1929. Over 10,000 Christians, including missionaries and local leaders, have left Laos since the beginning of the May demonstrations. The aging president of the Lao Evangelical Church, Rev. Sali Khounthapanya, reflected on the



The series of public demonstrations and celebrations last year brought out straw "CIA stooges," LPF military units on parade, and spectators of all ages. Photos by Murray Hiebert.

departure of the missionaries: "It was so pointless. The missionaries weren't threatened or endangered in any way. . . . We have to wonder also how important we Lao Christians really were to the missionaries. I worked with them since 1930 and now after they've been gone over four months not one of them has even sent us a letter."

Although the social service programs--long de-

pendent on funds from abroad -- have suffered, Christians continue to worship and practice their religion almost as before. As in the case of Buddhists, contacts between Christians on opposite sides of the former battle lines have been restored. The Catholic community in Vientiane recently heard from the 6,000 Christians in Sam Neua province and learned that they continue to

## PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF LAOS



Tiao Souphanouvong  
President



Kaysone Phomvihane  
Prime Minister



Phoum Sipraseuth  
Minister of Foreign Affairs

The All-Laos Congress of People's Representatives, which decided the change of governments, also approved a program of action. The December 2 program gives a detailed outline of the country's domestic goals and policies, and touches on the main principles of foreign policy.

According to the program, there will be a period of public education about the meaning of democratic freedoms, leading to elections for a National Assembly and the writing of a new constitution.

The army will be used in reconstruction efforts, but there will still be an emphasis on national defense. The main danger is described as "reactionary forces and henchmen of U.S. imperialism . . . in collusion with Thai reactionaries and the colonialist forces."

The program sets a goal of self-sufficiency in foods, and eventually an exportable surplus. The agricultural expansion will be supported by a network of state farms which will grow industrial crops and fruit trees, and will use modern methods of livestock and fish breeding.

Lumber is one of Laos' prime natural resources, and has in the past been exploited mainly by powerful individuals in the government who smuggled the timber into Thailand to avoid paying taxes. New state-run centers will now supervise the exploitation of the forests, and see that they are replanted. The government will also build factories to make furniture, rather than export only raw lumber.

Industrial plans focus on consumer goods and the processing of agricultural products. But looking toward the future, there is also some reference to mining and hydroelectric power "with a view to long-term planning of socialist industrialization." Press reports indicate that Laos may have significant unexplored mineral resources. In particular, there are recently discovered deposits of sylvite, a source of potash, which have interested the Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic, and Canada. Government officials have also said they would be open to Japanese and American involvement in developing these resources, so long as there were no political strings attached.

Cooperatives will be encouraged in both urban and rural areas for buying and selling all sorts of goods. There will also be a network of state-run trading agencies, and private traders will be encouraged to become agents



Resistance government, 1950. Souphanouvong at 1965 meeting. Souvanna Phouma (



meet and pray together, although they have been without trained leadership or contact with the Catholics on the Vientiane side since 1962. In May 1975, the president of the Evangelical Church went to visit the Christians on the Plain of Jars for the first time since the LPF gained control of the area in 1970. On occasion, revolutionary authorities attend a Sunday morning service and

speak to the congregation for ten or 15 minutes, explaining the meaning of the recent changes in the Laotian society. When neighborhood reeducation seminars began in Vientiane, Rev. Sali offered space in his church for this purpose. He also participates actively in his neighborhood revolutionary people's council, explaining that "Christians have a responsibility to serve their neighbors and society."

## -NEW PROGRAM; VETERAN LEADERSHIP-

for this network. The country's rudimentary road system will be developed, and new roads will be built to link Laos with Vietnamese ports.

The economy will be transformed "along a national and independent line in the advance to socialism." Social insurance will be provided. Private business will be encouraged to coordinate its activities with national programs. Solidarity teams and mutual aid teams will be organized in rural areas "to acquaint the peasants of all nationalities with the collective mode of work which is obviously more efficient than the old mode." Production cooperatives will be encouraged for handicraft workers, and small traders will be encouraged to switch to agricultural or handicraft production.

There is a two-pronged approach to social and cultural problems. There will be direct attacks on vices such as gambling and prostitution, and on "reactionary, pornographic and gangster books and magazines previously imported by the imperialists." At the same time there will be a program to gather historic and artistic relics and set up museums "to show the great capabilities of the Lao people." There is also stress on developing a "national, democratic and progressive" educational system.

The medical system will be developed down to the village level. Besides Western-style medicine, there will be a state-supported system of Eastern medicine, and centers to prepare herbal medicines.

Tourists will be encouraged "to come and see the beauty and riches of Laos."

Aid and trade relations will be sought with all countries which have "good will and the capability to assist Laos." The primary restriction is: no political strings.

The expressions of closest friendship are reserved for Vietnam and Cambodia. Good relations are also foreseen with the socialist countries, and Third World countries are singled out for particular mention. Although Thai reactionaries and U.S. imperialists are seen as a real danger, the program stresses the desire for friendly relations with the Thai people, and development of normal relations with "all countries regardless of social system and ideology" on the basis of the five principles of peaceful coexistence. At the same time, the program pledges resolute support for struggles, especially in Southeast Asia, for "genuine peace, independence, democracy, neutrality and social progress."



Nouhak Phoumsavanh  
Minister of Finance



Phoumi Vongvichit  
Minister of Education  
Sports and Worship



Khamtay Xiphandone  
Minister of National Defense



Hands power to Kaysone Phomvihane, 1975. Phoumi Vongvichit addresses 1975 rally.



Vientiane-side soldiers dance with LPF troops after turning in their weapons in October, 1975.  
Photo by Nguyen thi The/VNA.

## Seminars: Country First

A well-thought-out concept of a revolutionary change in attitudes is being pursued in Laos. Attendance at various sorts of seminars is mandatory for all strata of the Vientiane bureaucracy and society, from the ministerial level "down" to high school students. When asked specifically about the purpose of the seminars, Lao Patriotic Front spokesman Sone Khamvanevongsa replied:

*"The seminar program is necessary because we needed to have a way for officials and officers to become public servants who really care for their country first. Through reeducation they will come to understand that they are citizens of one nation, truly independent and democratic. They must become upright people who will understand their primary responsibility, which is to contribute to the building of their nation. Before, ... it was just every man selfishly taking what he could, selling off the natural resources of the country--wood, for instance--and pocketing all the profits, and most of the foreign aid, to build villas and enrich themselves at the expense of the ordinary people."*

Participants report that the seminars do not simply seek to produce a passive acceptance or

parroting of the point of view of the LPF. What is wanted is described in a Lao word new to the active vocabulary of the population of Vientiane: *sang seng*, which means "seeing through to the light." It is not enough simply to start talking of the Americans as imperialists or neo-colonialists who sought to control the economy and attitudes of the Laotians, and how this might serve American interests. One must understand the kind of development which this control sought to prevent or negate.

In the seminars, the Lao Patriotic Front also appeals to people to return to the old ways of Laos. People remember that they once enjoyed a deeper sense of community than they have in recent years.

Of course, there is a broad spectrum of reactions to the seminars. For one thing, the quality of the seminar teachers varies considerably, although the basics of the message reportedly vary little. Another factor seems to be social class. But an experienced Western observer in Vientiane mentioned the case of one man he would have expected because of his social class to react negatively. Instead, he turned out to be very enthusiastic about the new level of cooperation that had occurred in his neighborhood, because "this is how Laos used to be, the old Laos."

For some people the reeducation seminars are an exciting exercise in a political and economic analysis of their own life situation. And the seminars can be genuinely liberating, by dispelling the fears instilled by many years of anti-communist propaganda. One instance: most of the

Black Thai minority group has fled to Thailand. But one Black Thai woman who has attended the seminars says she now has no fear of the future in Laos. In fact, she has informed her husband who has not yet attended seminars that she will not follow him if he chooses to flee.

One former bureaucrat reports that his seminars have involved writing long and detailed answers to questions about his opinions, to very personal

## POLITICAL TRIALS

In a swift half-day trial before a five-man tribunal, six of the major figures of the old rightist Vientiane administration had been found guilty of treason, corruption, and gross abuse of power. They had been sentenced to death. Further, the trial convicted 25 other rightists -- all prominent men in the now-defunct, American-supported administration -- on similar charges and sentenced them in time to catch the midday news. Five would spend the rest of their lives in jail, the remainder 21 years.

Jail sentences for people long considered by many to be totally corrupt aroused little sympathy in Vientiane. While none doubted the validity of charges against the six condemned to death, the idea of the sentences served to shock the majority of the population....

It was only at the end [of the report] that the announcer ... mentioned that the drastic sentences would be carried out only if ever the 31 convicted men decided to return to Laos. Laos, true to character, had done justice with the minimum of pain....

There have been no trials, nor are any predicted, for the many rightists remaining in the country.

--John Everingham, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 3, 1975

questions about whether he had ever been involved in corrupt practices. For some, the seminars seem just the means by which the LPF "tries to make us think like they do, and hate whom they hate." A fairly common complaint is that the anti-imperialist point of view is being presented too rhetorically and too vehemently. One woman said, "We like many of their ideas; it's just how they are presented, in the language of the marketplace." But even for some of the people who are not terribly enthusiastic about reeducation, a visible result of the seminars is a new pride and sense of identity as Lao people.

Reeducation for Mr. Somchith Philathivong, the Director for Cooperation with International Organizations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

included a trip to the barbarically bombed Plain of Jars, where he was able to see for himself the extent to which America had gone to try to destroy the independence movement in Laos. It is rumored that some of the corrupt officials who were ousted during demonstrations in May and June are now actually helping to fill in some of those bomb craters as part of their reeducation.

The first month of a seminar for Vientiane policemen held at Vang Vieng involved a month of building housing for themselves and those who will follow. A series of seminars for Vientiane officials ended, to their surprise, with a week spent fishing for food and doing other kinds of exercises in living off the land so that people would realize that "you don't have to buy everything in the market." So besides attempting to engender a new feeling for Laos as an inviolably independent nation, the seminars are also trying to teach some of the basic lessons learned by the Front during its years of struggle in the mountains, jungles and caves of Laos. In the difficult economic situation which Laos will face for the next few years--though the long-term economic outlook is very good--*kum tone aeng*, finding solutions that use locally available resources and talent, is not romantic revolutionary ideology.

## Aid Cuts Strain Economy

Recent Laotian steps to achieve independence from American domination have led to serious economic reprisals. American embassy officials predicted in June that Congress would cut off virtually all U.S. economic assistance to Laos in fiscal year 1976. Apparently these American officials fail to appreciate either the nonviolent tactics of the Laotian demonstrators or the reasons why it was necessary for Laos to ask AID personnel to leave. First, as American officials readily admit, the budget and personnel resources of AID virtually made it a "state within a state" rivaling the power and influence of the Vientiane government itself. Second, Laotians argue that AID officials, with their access to vast areas and large numbers of people in Laos, often misused this privilege to gather intelligence information. Third, AID was able to use its supposedly humanitarian programs for political and military purposes such as supporting General Vang Pao's Meo mercenaries. Fourth, U.S. aid was inefficiently used, paying large salaries to AID officials when this money could have been used more effectively to employ Laotians and to be used directly on projects.

LPF officials do not want to lose all American aid. Last year the coalition government received

approximately \$100 million in foreign aid, 70 percent of which came from the U.S. Despite the fact that Laos -- especially the Vientiane side--



*From Xieng Paasoun (Voice of the People).*

has perhaps been over-aided during the past decades, Laos is still desperately in need of reconstruction and development assistance. In 1972 the United Nations listed Laos among the world's 25 poorest countries. Thirty years of warfare forced a large percentage of the formerly self-sufficient agrarian population into the cities where they have become dependent on foreign handouts and imports. As a result, about 90 percent of the market goods in southern Laos have been imported in recent years.

If American aid is cut off, the Foreign Exchange Operations Fund (FEOF), established in 1964 by the U.S. in cooperation with Australia, Japan, France and Britain to support the weak Laotian kip, will likely also collapse. So far only a fraction of the estimated \$35 million needed to support FEOF this year has been pledged. At the end of April, the National Bank estimated that it had only \$6 million in reserves. However, before economic restrictions were introduced in August 1974, withdrawals from the fund ran at about \$4 million per month. Since imports were tightened the monthly deficit has been cut to \$2 million. Nevertheless, considering that the import of oil alone cost over \$8 million in 1974, it is clear that Laos will face desperate shortages should more aid not be forthcoming soon. The Laotians themselves have been making efforts to diversify their sources of assistance by sending aid-seeking missions to many European and socialist states, but so far have only received some rice and cement.

The cutback in imports is already seriously affecting Laotian foodstocks. The markets of southern Laos, which used to be full of cheap fruits and vegetables imported from Thailand, now have only scrawny, but very expensive produce. Rice is also in short supply. In the past few

months the price of 100 kilos of rice has risen from 20,000 to 60,000 kip (\$48), which is more than the monthly salary of even higher-paid urban workers. Government officials have dipped into stocks of rice earmarked for refugees to sell at subsidized prices in Vientiane. In southern Laos -- especially Savannakhet and Pakse -- the food shortage became so grave that at one point there were reports of malnutrition and even starvation. Now, however, reports from that region indicate that a series of new measures including replacing the currency have stabilized the situation.

Industry has also been seriously affected by the shortage of foreign capital, much of which left the country with the foreigners who fled in the panic when the demonstrations began in May. Should more foreign aid not be forthcoming shortly, industry will have to stop as the import of raw materials will become impossible. A shortage of gasoline is another problem affecting both industry and the transportation of food. In an attempt to ration gasoline, the price was increased by 50 percent in April. Unfortunately, however, the devaluation of the kip and inflation virtually wiped out the increase so that most of Vientiane's car owners continue to consume Laos' desperately needed oil reserves.

Certainly American aid of the past has greatly benefited the opulent lifestyle of the middle class of the cities. However, with an inflation



*Students attacked AID because of its CIA connections and its status as a "parallel government," but foreign assistance without strings is still needed. Photo by Eryl Kubicka.*

rate of over 40 percent during the first six months of 1975, luxury items have become ridiculously expensive or unavailable. Without foreign aid, the already more austere life of the cities will become impossible because industries will close and the markets will be empty. Already some urban residents have moved back to their farms because prices in the city are too high and their wages too low. Some civil servants are sending their families into the countryside to grow rice and vegetables.

Although continuing movement to the farm will be encouraged, Laos still desperately needs aid for the next period of reconstruction. After a generation and billions of dollars in American military and economic aid, Laos' bountiful natural resources have yet to be ecologically developed. Furthermore, Laos still does not have a developed transportation system to ship rice from one part of the country to another. (The Americans transported everything by airplane.) As a result, Laos imports about 100,000 tons of rice from Thailand per year to feed its northern population. At least some of this rice was originally sold to Thailand from southern Laos in the first place, because there was no economic way to transport it north.

Deputy Prime Minister Phoumi Vongvichit says that the way American aid was given in the past kept Laos dependent on foreign aid rather than helping Laos achieve self-sufficiency. However, despite the recent demonstrations against the American AID apparatus in Laos, the Laotian government still wants and needs U.S. assistance, but without strings attached, and managed by the Laotians themselves. Putting the Laotian economy on a solid foundation of self-sufficiency based on its vast agricultural and natural resource potential, however, will take several years. A definitive withdrawal of all American aid to punish Laos for having chosen independence would be a severe shock to a country trying desperately to rebuild after thirty years of devastating warfare.

## Looking Abroad: Independence & Neutrality

The most repeated slogan in Laos nowadays is "Peace, independence, democracy, neutrality, unity, prosperity." It is clear, from the rhetoric at least, that Laos has learned much from having been buffeted about by Thailand, Vietnam, France, Japan and the U.S. during the past 200 years. Yet when asked about relations with foreign countries, especially its two most recent foes, the U.S. and Thailand, officials emphasize that Laos wants to have relations with all countries which "respect the neutrality and sovereignty of Laos." The current lineup of relations with Laos' neighbors and several of the world and regional powers is something like this:

**VIETNAM:** Clearly Laos' closest foreign ties are with Vietnam. The origin of the Lao Patriotic Front lies in the Indochinese Communist Party founded by Ho Chi Minh in 1930. The most promi-

nent members of the LPF Central Committee, Souphanouvong, Kaysone and Nouhak, have close ties with the Vietnamese revolution. Vietnam was also

## END OF THE MONARCHY



King Savang Vatthana reviews LPF troops in November 1975. Photo by Murray Hiebert.

On November 29 Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong flew to the royal capital of Luang Prabang where, together with Prince Souvanna Phouma and Pathet Lao Foreign Minister Phoumi Vonvichit, he met King Savang Vatthana and informed him of the historic decisions taken at Vieng Sai: The monarchy was to be abolished and the coalition Government and Joint Political Council were to be dissolved....

The King reportedly . . . asked only that those members of his family and entourage who wished to leave be allowed to do so -- more than 30 subsequently left -- and that he himself should be allowed to keep a plot of land on which to live. The Pathet Lao agreed.

That afternoon, the King's secretary drafted the letter of abdication, which the King then signed. It said that the continued existence of the monarchy alongside "the people's sovereign power" was "impracticable and could be an obstacle" to the country's progress. The King therefore "solemnly renounced the throne from this day" and also "voluntarily renounced all [his] wealth," with the words: "As a simple Lao citizen, I sincerely address my best wishes for the unity, independence, well-being, and prosperity of the beloved Lao people." He then left the palace, before the abdication was publicly announced, for his summer home a few miles north of Luang Prabang, where he keeps an orange and mango plantation and where he is expected to live out his retirement, probably on a modest Government stipend.

--Norman Peagam, Far Eastern Economic Review, December 19, 1975

Laos' closest ally during the war, providing advisers and military supplies. Many foreign observers therefore argue that Laos is totally dominated and controlled by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. To both the Laos and the Vietnamese, this concept is incredible. Instead, they characterize the relationship of the two countries as one of solidarity, cooperation and interdependence. Dao Viet Dinh, First Secretary of the D.R.V. embassy in Vientiane, recently said, "We desperately need the Vietnamese advisers and technicians now serving in Laos for reconstruction back home. Laos, however, has requested them to stay to help with various reconstructive tasks here such as road building." Vietnam continues to be one of Laos' major suppliers of foreign aid. Last summer the D.R.V. gave 1,700 tons of rice to Laos. More recently it has become quite commonplace to see former American C-130 transport planes -- still spotted camouflage green but with the D.R.V. flag replacing the U.S. Air Force insignia--being unloaded at Wattay Airport. Formerly the D.R.V. embassy was located on the outskirts of Vientiane and many of its visitors were harassed by rightist secret police. The embassy has now moved to a more central location near the former Saigon government's embassy.

CAMBODIA: Along with representatives of the D.R.V., the P.R.G., the Soviet Union and China, Cambodia's Ieng Sary attended Independence Day celebrations in Vieng Sai on October 12. In his address Prince Souphanouvong stressed that the victory of the Indochinese people was the result of the "militant relations among the Lao, Vietnamese and Cambodian peoples." Although ambassadors have not been exchanged since the collapse of the Lon Nol regime, relations between Laos and Cambodia are clearly fraternal. The Lao press generally carries more news from Vietnam and Cambodia than from anywhere else.

THAILAND: Next to Vietnam, Thailand is probably Laos' most important neighbor. However, since the rightist "American lackeys" gave up the fight in May, relations between Laos and Thailand have been strained at several points:

\* The first problem is certainly Thailand's major role during the war. Thailand was partially responsible for the collapse of the coalition government attempts in Laos in 1958 and 1962. Thailand had as many as 50,000 mercenary troops fighting in Laos at one time and provided an important base for American B-52 raids over Indochina and the "special war" of the CIA in Laos. In speeches and political reeducation seminars, Thailand is regularly accused of being an "ally of the American imperialists."

\* When the Lao rightists fled to Thailand in May, they took with them at least 20 planes. Although Laos has repeatedly demanded the return of these planes, Thailand argues--as in the case of the Vietnamese planes -- that it still hasn't determined if the planes belong to Laos or to the

U.S. A Thai reporter who recently saw these planes at Udorn said that the Lao Air Force insignia had been replaced with that of the U.S. Air Force.

\* According to Lao press agencies, Thailand continues to fly reconnaissance planes over Laos --2,000 between May and August of 1975 -- and its Navy boats continue to cross over into Lao territory.

\* Many of the 68,000 Lao--mostly Meo--refugees in Thailand are being resettled in Nan and Nong



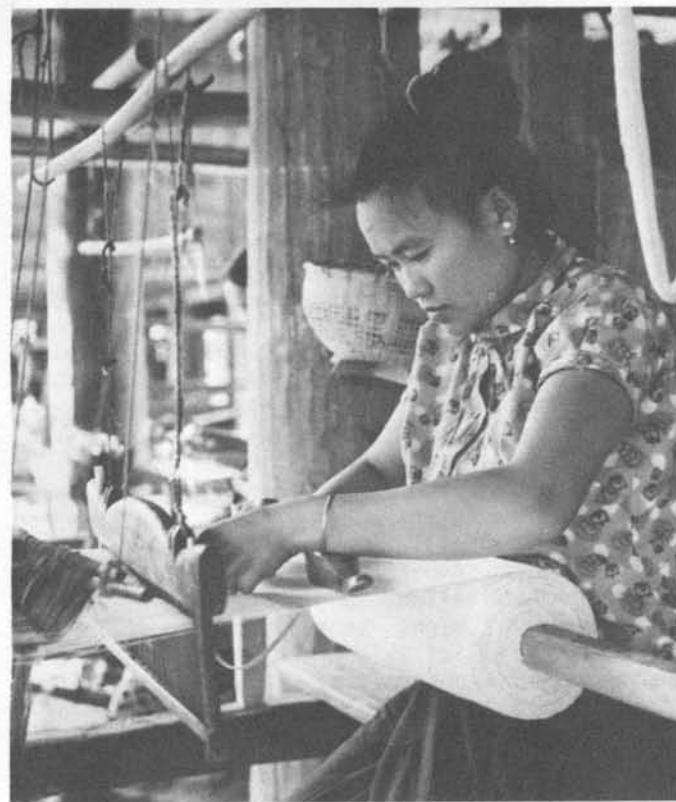
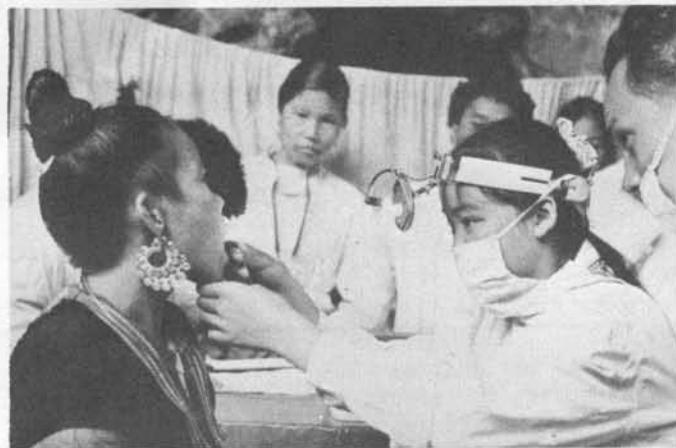
Meo refugees in Laos in the summer of 1975. Many of the Meo are now on the Thai side of the border. Photo by Monique McClellan.

Khai provinces along the border with Laos. Understandably, Laos is concerned that these followers of General Vang Pao may be trained for a right wing coup or an attack on Laos.

\* For years Thailand has held a monopoly on surface transportation to Laos, and has dominated Laos' import-export trade. Laos has charged that results in artificially high costs to them. More recently, Thailand closed off its border with Laos, blocking all trade. Now, however, Laos will have alternative transportation routes through Vietnam, and a wider variety of suppliers for imports.

Despite these problems and tensions between the two countries, Laos wants relations with Thailand on the basis of mutual respect for each other's independence and sovereignty and without interference in each other's internal affairs. Like Vietnam, however, Laos has said that no dialogue with Thailand will be possible until the U.S. withdraws all of its troops. The ethnic, cultural, geographic, economic and historical links of these two countries makes it imperative that they cooperate.

U.S.S.R.: If one accepts the analysis of both China and the U.S., the Soviet Union is now seek-



The educational and medical systems set up by the LPF during the war years and widespread handicraft skills will be important resources as Laos builds towards self-sufficiency. KPL photos.

ing hegemony over Laos. Although the number of Russians is certainly increasing, the French are still the most conspicuous and numerous of foreigners. Estimates on the number of Soviet pilots, engineers, technicians and diplomats here vary from 500 to 1,500. These experts are involved in surveying for minerals, developing water projects, building bridges and oil storage facilities, and flying and maintaining airplanes for the LPF. The U.S.S.R. is presumably paying for these projects.

Certainly many of the roles and functions of the Russians are similar to those formerly held by AID. The Laotians are clearly aware of this, but argue that during this period of postwar reconstruction they have little choice due to their own shortage of trained technicians. Moreover, they emphasize that they have learned many lessons regarding foreign intervention and domination from their experience with AID in recent years. Within the next few years they hope to train enough of their own technicians in order not to be dependent on foreigners any longer.

CHINA: On the surface it is understandable why the press has concluded that Laos is closer to the U.S.S.R. than to China in its relations. A Chinese diplomat apparently recently told some reporters: "The Russians are trying to replace the Americans in Laos. But the Laotian people will never let the tiger in through the back door while kicking the wolf out the front gate." China is certainly considered a very friendly country. China was invited to the Independence Day celebration in Vieng Sai along with Laos' other closest allies. Last summer China bought 10,000 tons of Thai rice for Laos. China has also been building some roads in northern Laos. Recently China opened a "Peace Bookstore" in Vientiane and on October 12 provided a fantastic 5,000-piece Independence Day fireworks display here.

JAPAN: Relations between Laos and Japan appear friendly, but low-key at present. In the past Japan provided some funds for FEOF, the Nam Ngum Dam and the reconstruction of several destroyed villages on the Vientiane side. At present Japan is not doing much in Laos because: 1) Japan probably is not sure if Laos is important enough to attract Japanese investment; and, 2) the Laotians, although interested in Japanese help in developing the high-grade sylvite deposits (raw material for fertilizer) on the Vientiane Plain, are somewhat leery about Japanese conditions which would give Japan control over some of Laos' vital resources. Recently one Laotian said, "We've got to watch the Japanese. Look how they've taken control of Indonesia and Thailand."

THE UNITED STATES: Surprisingly enough, the U.S. still has an embassy in Vientiane. The U.S. embassy does little besides "spook" and provide consular services. Lao employees spend much of their time reading Xieng Paasasoun (Voice of the People, the party newspaper). Although the "Lao

28" (remaining official Americans) call themselves a "peace team," they argue that aid to Laos is unlikely in the near future because of the "illegal actions" against U.S. property in mid-1975.

Despite vague utterances from the State Department about Laos not wanting aid from the U.S., Laos would still very much welcome such aid. On May 23, Phoumi Vongvichit told a mass rally at the National Stadium: "The removal of AID doesn't mean we don't want more aid from the U.S. We want to continue getting aid from the U.S. on the same basis as we get it from other friendly countries in the world. But whether it be military or economic assistance, let it be direct aid to the Lao government."

## U.S. Policy: Opportunity For A New Start

The abdication of the King of Laos, the abolition of the coalition government and the founding of the People's Democratic Republic of Laos will force the Ford administration to reappraise its policy of hostility toward the Lao revolution. After the May exodus of the major rightist figures in the Provisional Government of National Union, the U.S. embassy in Vientiane was still able to say that it did "not yet consider Laos a communist country." But now Secretary Kissinger is face-to-face with yet another small, peasant, communist nation in Indochina, and he already has an embassy there. At this writing the Charge d'Affaires, head of the U.S. mission in Vientiane, is in Bangkok for consultations, undoubtedly to confer about U.S. reaction to the new People's Democratic Republic.

The Ford administration has three options: 1) sink deeper into its policy of hostility by breaking diplomatic relations with Laos; 2) continue to withhold aid, in which case Lao-American relations would continue to deteriorate (all other major countries with diplomatic relations are giving aid); or 3) begin to give aid to heal the wounds of war in Laos, thus quietly stepping into a new era of relations with the communist countries of Indochina.

Laos very much wants the aid. Laos is literally "out of gas." The kip is sinking fast. (It lost a quarter of its value against the dollar in one day in early December.) Vientiane residents, including some relatively poor people, who do not

yet have a vision of the possible efficacy or dignity of cooperative development -- or who are not willing to face a period of relative hardship --are leaving the country by the hundreds. Thailand is pursuing a punitive policy of economic blockade, but even if the border were to reopen, Laos is so broke that it would mean little economically.

### MERCENARIES AGAIN?



The CIA's General Vang Pao: are his mercenaries back in action? Photo by Monique McClellan.

Thai mercenaries have returned to Laos, according to reports reaching Bangkok. Many former mercenaries -- who were paid and directed by America's CIA during the Indochina War -- received letters from their old commanders in early October in which they were asked if they would like to sign on again. Those who accepted were sent for brief refresher courses at isolated camps in northeast Thailand before being sent into Laos. Some are now believed to be in the Long Cheng area, where the Laotian Government acknowledges there has been sporadic fighting. According to the reports, a number of Meo refugees have also been trained militarily in Thailand and returned to the mountains of northern Laos to create confusion. It is not clear whether General Vitoon Yasawat, who acted as the chief liaison man between the CIA and the Thai mercenaries, is involved. He was transferred back to the army from a position in the police several months ago and has since maintained a very low profile. Nor is it clear whether there is an American hand in the mercenaries' reactivation. While the idea of U.S. entanglement might seem improbable following the fall of Saigon and Phnom Penh and the recent exposures of CIA activities, it would certainly fit into an established pattern: The Americans sent sabotage and intelligence teams into China and North Vietnam soon after those countries "went communist."

--"Intelligence" column, Far Eastern Economic Review, December 5, 1975

The diplomatic speculation is that the Soviet Union will not give Laos the amount of aid needed -- "Giving Laos only one fourth of what she needs will fully protect Russian interests here." China, it is reported, will give aid only in kind; Laos must use Chinese credits to buy Chinese products. The revolution in Indochina is secure. There is no political need for either the Soviet Union or China to provide aid on the massive scale of Soviet aid for Cuba. Nor could the U.S. change Laos' independent socialist policy, the broad strokes of which have been decided. AID will not come back.

If U.S. aid were extended now, even in relatively small amounts, it would be the most significant positive change in U.S. foreign policy in years. The people of Laos, like the people of Vietnam, are amazingly willing to forgive. But the move must come now. In two years postwar refugee resettlement will have been completed. In two years the economy of Laos will have recovered, in one way or another, from the crisis of the abrupt and total withdrawal of American money, and the United States will have lost its best chance to demonstrate humanity and good will toward the people of Laos.

The United States is facing a major decision. The fact that the challenge comes from a minor player on the world stage would allow the U.S. to begin a turnaround in Indochina with little or no loss of face; the Indochinese have always been careful to give the United States such opportunities. But a negative decision on the question of aid for the People's Democratic Republic of Laos in this time of need would indicate a continuing negative attitude toward normalizing relations with all of Indochina. ■

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Photo by KPL.

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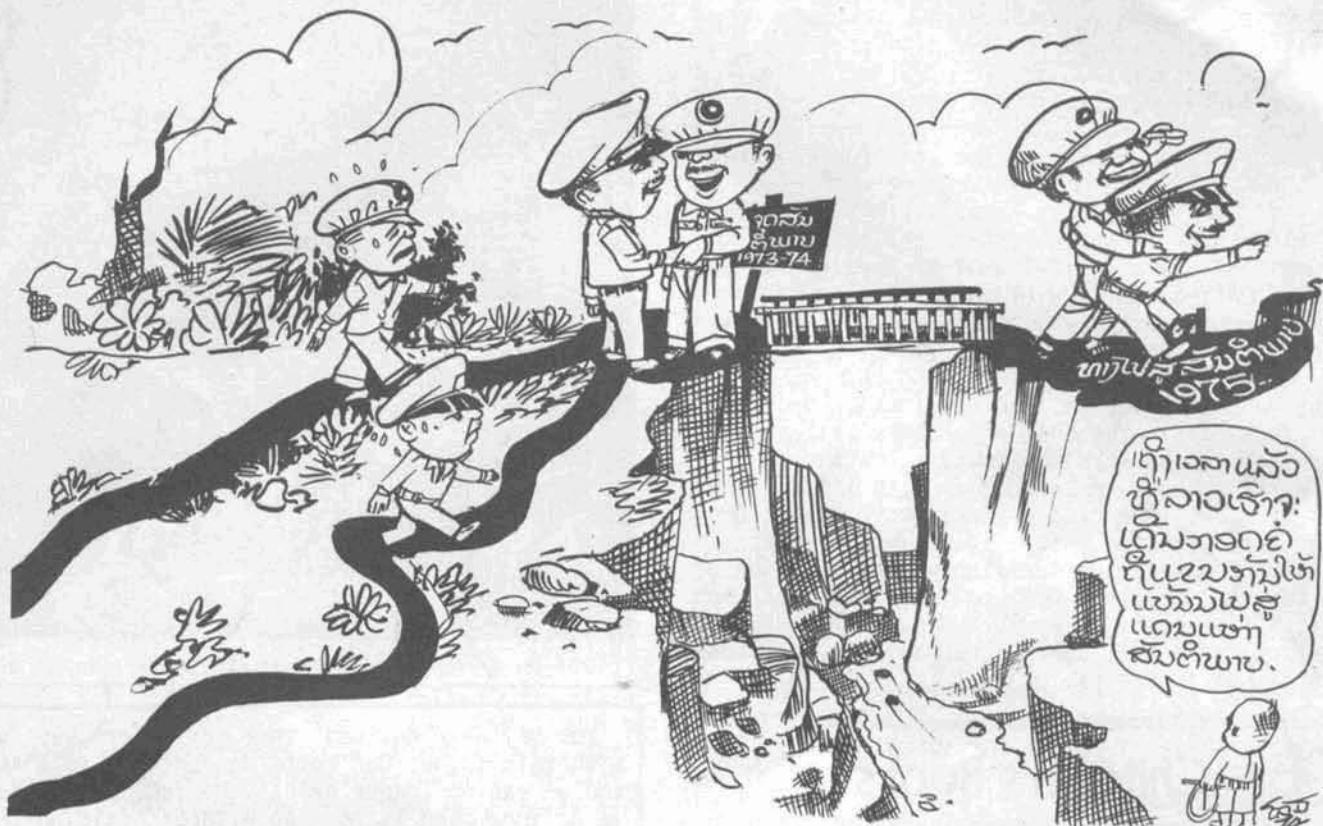
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